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ABSTRACT

This digest paper examines the special roles of parents of children with disabilities in planning for the education of their children and discusses how educators can work effectively with parents to create meaningful individualized education programs (IEPs). Barriers to parental participation in the IEP process are identified, including communication problems and educational jargon, lack of understanding of the school system, lack of knowledge of how to help their child, feelings of inferiority, and logistical problems. Among suggestions for facilitating meaningful parental participation are finding out the parents' preferences and needs prior to scheduling the IEP conference. Suggestions are then offered for involving parents during each of the three phases of the IEP conference: (1) reviewing the evaluation and performance level (avoid jargon); (2) developing instructional goals and objectives (determine parents' expectations concerning the child's future); and (3) determining placement and related services. Suggestions for handling disagreements during the IEP process are also provided. (DB)

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Involving Parents in the IEP Process

Stephen W. Smith

Parents can play a number of important roles in their relationship with their child's school—organization members, care providers, political advocates, and facilitators of professional decisions. This digest examines the special roles of parents of children with disabilities in planning for the education of their children and discusses how educators can work effectively with parents to create meaningful individualized education programs (IEPs).

The parents' role as committee members and educational decision makers in creating IEPs was established in 1975 by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Even though parent involvement is a defining feature of IDEA, Congress, as part of the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, believed that parental involvement needed strengthening. As a result, parents' rights and responsibilities are again in the forefront as a necessary ingredient for appropriate and individualized educational programming, mandating that schools provide an opportunity for active parental participation in decisions about the education of children.

The involvement of parents in the IEP process has many benefits:

- Increase the teacher's understanding of the child's environment
- Add to parents' knowledge of the child's educational setting
- Improve communication between parents and the school
- Increase the school's understanding of the child
- Increase the likelihood that, with improved understanding between home and school, mutually agreed upon educational goals will be attained.

Understanding Barriers to Parent Participation

When parents are not active in the IEP process, educators may sometimes misinterpret their lack of involvement. They may believe that parents are satisfied with the decisions being made for their child and do not see the need for further participation, are apathetic about their involvement in the IEP process, or do not have enough information about their child's functioning and the nature of the decisions to be made to allow them to participate. Yet numerous barriers may preclude a parent's active participation in the IEP process:

Communication problems and educational jargon. Communication problems and lack of understanding of the school system may result from the intricate and sometimes arcane language used in the IEP. Law-related elements, the meaning of statistical analyses, and terminology about placement and programming options (e.g., resource room, mainstreaming, inclusion, self-contained) may confuse or discourage a parent.

Lack of understanding of the school system, lack of knowledge of how to help their child, or feelings of inferiority. Sometimes parents feel ill equipped to provide meaningful educational information about their child that can help professionals develop special education programming. The professional staff's lack of understanding of the student's culture or language may lead parents to feel inferior or inhibited. For example, some parents are from places in the world where they were not allowed to question or disagree with authority figures, and so they may be reticent to assert their opinions with professionals.

Logistical problems. Parents' participation might be hindered by lack of transportation or child-care, or scheduling difficulties related to work or other responsibilities.

Facilitating Meaningful Participation

An obvious barrier to parental participation is a language difference. As much as possible, all correspondence with parents should be in their native language—not only to avoid confusion, but also to establish trust in the IEP process. At times an interpreter may facilitate more effective communication.

Prior to the meeting, educators should solicit information from the parents about their preferences and needs regarding the conference, including a convenient time and place.

School staff and parents can decide if the student should attend the conference, with parental preferences respected.

It would also be helpful to determine if the family would like to invite an advocate to the meeting. A family advocate (e.g., clergy member, friend, counselor, university faculty, legal advisor, nurse/doctor) can assist parents in asking questions, understanding programming and placement options, or identifying family-specific issues. An advocate can assist a family in building a child-centered, long-lasting partnership with district and school personnel. When viewed as a promoter and supporter of the child and family, an advocate becomes a valued invited guest and not an adversary.

Parents must be formally notified in writing about the purpose of the meeting, the time and location, and participants. Including participants' positions (principal or designee, special education teacher, general education teacher, etc.) as well as their names can help parents understand who they are and why they will be attending the meeting.

At the outset of the meeting, educators should

- greet the family members and advocate,
- provide a list of all participants,

- introduce all in attendance with a brief explanation about their role in the conference,
- state the purpose of the meeting,
- make positive observations about the child,
- emphasize that the parents possess helpful information about the child and that they are partners in this process,
- provide enough time to complete deliberations, or offer to reschedule the meeting to complete the agenda. Include time to ensure that family members understand their legal rights.

The Three Phases of the IEP Conference

Reviewing the evaluation and performance level. Avoid educational jargon when reviewing the results of the formal evaluation. Parents should receive a summary of the findings that emphasize the child's strengths, gifts, abilities, and needs. Diagnostic personnel should explain the tests and provide parents with a copy of the results. Be sure that parents understand the findings of the evaluation, and give them the opportunity to ask questions. Provide a chance for them to express their views of the child's abilities and needs, especially from the home point of view. Parents need to feel that the evaluation is an accurate reflection of their child.

Developing instructional goals and objectives. When developing the student's instructional goals and objectives, it is crucial that parents, advocates, and students share their expectations about the student's future participation in school, the home, and the community. Educational and vocational goals and objectives consistent with the expectations of the student and family can then be developed and prioritized with the student's needs in mind. At the same time, parents, advocates, and other family members can indicate which objectives they can help teach or reinforce at home. Procedures for evaluating achievement of goals and objectives should be discussed and schedules set.

Determining placement and related services. Parents, advocates, and other family members can provide invaluable information to help determine placement options and related services for the student. The placement option selected (regular education classroom, resource room, self-contained class, separate building, home or hospital) must allow the student to participate in typical school experiences with typical peers as much as possible. Since parents may have concerns about the integration of their child in a school setting, including questions of safety, attitudes of regular education teachers towards special education students, program quality, transportation, and potential for failure, these concerns should be addressed in the planning for the child.

Accommodations in the classroom and in testing must be listed, and when applicable, plans for family services, behavioral interventions, and meeting transition needs must be developed. Necessary related services, such as speech pathology and audiology or psychological services, must be identified. At this point it is necessary to determine dates for initiating services and their anticipated duration and to identify individuals who will be responsible for delivering the services.

At the end of the conference, clarify and summarize major deci-

sions and the responsibilities of participants, including family members and advocates. Identify strategies to ensure that future communications with parents are ongoing and collegial in order to maximize the benefits of the program for the student. Thanking the parents, family members, and advocate is paramount in emphasizing that their active participation is a valued and essential part of the decision-making process.

What to Do When People Disagree

Team members should recognize that there is always a chance for disagreement. If this happens, everyone involved in the IEP process should keep in mind that the student's interests are the main objective, and regardless of the outcome, school personnel and parents will still have to work together.

The best, fastest, and least costly way to solve a conflict is through informal problem solving. If team members are unable to resolve the conflict, an outside person, whose selection is agreed upon by all parties, can act as an independent facilitator to bring clarity to the problem. This should be someone who can listen attentively and whom everyone trusts. All involved in the process should keep open minds and again, try to do what is best for the student.

Some situations demand more formal means of resolving differences. IDEA is clear about the legal rights of state and local education agencies and parents as well as specific procedures that must be followed when IEP team members disagree. Mediation is a voluntary and confidential process that brings conflicting parties together to obtain a written agreement. If an agreement cannot be reached in mediation with a trained mediator, the more formal "due process hearing" is in order. Due process hearings are long, tedious procedures that can be extremely costly for everyone involved. They start with a signed complaint and are administered by a qualified and impartial person. The decision made as the result of a due process hearing is final unless school personnel or parents file an appeal to the state board of education.

In summary, supporting the active participation of parents and advocates in the IEP process will focus the IEP on the intent of IDEA: the development of a comprehensive program, with goals and objectives that are relevant and acceptable to parents, regular teachers, and special education teachers. Active participation assumes that the parental role as educational decision maker is one that is supported by the school system and will lead to closer communication between home and school.

Resources

- Harry, B., Kalyanpur, M., & Day, M. (1999). *Building cultural reciprocity with families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.
- Dunst, C., Hamby, D. Tivette, C., Raab, M. & Bruder, M. (2000). Everyday family and community life and children's naturally occurring learning opportunities. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 23(3), 151-164.
- Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER) Center, 8161 Normandale Blvd., Minneapolis, MN 55437 (952-838-9000), www.pacer.org
- Federation for Children with Mental Health Needs, 1101 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 (703-684-7710), www.fcmh.org